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ABSTRACT

Any comic strip artist deals in stereotypes. The history of two black comic strips begun in the 1920s, "Bungleton Green" and "Sunny Boy Sam," both of which featured anti-heroes in the "fall guy" tradition, may be traced to show the way in which they portrayed black stereotypes. Black strips engaged in a degree of stereotyping of white characters as well. Comic strips written by whites in the 1930s and 1940s showed blacks as menial background figures or as simpletons; with the rise in black consciousness, these characters disappeared. Black characters returned to white strips during the 1960s, when black children characters began to be introduced. Two black adventure strips of the 1940s, "Jive Gray" and "Speed Jaxon," featured central characters who were military heroes. A significant breakthrough for syndicated comic strips came in 1970 with the introduction of Lt. Flap-a genuinely "black" character whose humor flowed almost directly from his racial identification-in the "Beetle Bailey" comic strip. Even "Tarzan" has become less patronizing toward black African characters. Few black newspapers any longer run their own comic strips. (GW)

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"COLOR" IN THE COMIC STRIPS: RACIAL STEREOTYPING TRENDS IN BLACK AND IN WHITE NEWSPAPERS

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The comic strips have been a popular feature of metropolitan newspapers for more than 75 years and of black newspapers for more than 50. Any comic strip artist must deal in stereotypes; considering how briefly he holds a reader's attention, he must get his message across clearly and simply and stereotypes are one of his handiest tools. But there is an infinite range of stereotypes upon which he can draw, and presumably his choices reflect not only his own standards but those of his publication and of the standards he perceives are held by the majority of his readers. This is an attempt to examine the way racial stereotypes have been depicted in both syndicated comic strips and in strips appearing in the largest black weeklies.

First, the black papers.[1] Only the largest have carried their own strips, usually drawn by editorial cartoonists in their "spare" time. Two of the most popular were passed from artist to artist, "Bungleton Green" at the Chicago Defender had four creators (1920-1963)[2] and "Sunny Boy Sam" had two since his introduction in the Pittsburgh Courier in 1929. Both anti-heroes were in the "fall guy" tradition of Happy Hooligan, Augustus Mutt and later of Dagwood Bumstead and Charlie Brown. The role of the fall guy has been defined this way: "The fall guy must drink the cup of misfortune down to the very dregs, so that the reader may find a momentary release from his own frustrations."[3] Surely, through the years, blacks had more than their share of excuses for seeking that kind of solace in their newspapers.

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Although many books and articles have catalogued and analyzed American black humor,[4] none has concentrated on the comic strips. The strips clearly exhibit many of the same characteristics which researchers have found in black folklore, songs, games, jokes and stories, namely survival, escape, self-criticism and conflict resolution.[5]

A recent analyst of black humor concluded:

> Thus the humor of the Afro-American prior to the militant decades of the fifties and sixties reflected the position of the "enslaved"--one who, in the inferior status and unable to protect himself, devised the humor of survival and of passive-aggressive. With the onset of the Civil Rights movement, however, black attitudes and means of expressing them began to change quickly although within the context of changes, several features remained essentially the same.... In recent years, open challenge and chiding admonishment have become major elements in black humor, as Afro-Americans utilize barbs, quips, and mocking laughter to reveal their sense of mission and accomplishment.[6]

Bung debuted the same month that the American voters (with the strong backing of most of the black press) handed Warren G. Harding a mandate to return to normalcy. Throughout his first decade, Bung was kicked around, in one scrape after another. Usually he was on the hustle, out of money, and down on his luck; however, when the stock market crashed in 1929, his artist suddenly changed Bung into an eccentric millionaire. The readers, many of them out of work, watched their fantasy self head for Africa on a lavish honeymoon, and while there he slayed six lions and was made chief of the Congo. When he returned and his investments went bad, his oil wells came in.

From 1934 until World War II, Bung was a <u>schlemeil</u> again, but during the war he became one of the "mystic commandoes" and roamed the world fighting Nazi agents and race baiters. After the war, he was a police

agent, working underground to root out bootleggers of scarce commodities and those who stirred up race riots. During these phases, it was not a gag strip but an adventure continuity strip.

In one strip (Oct. 13, 1945), Bung took a rap at the white press. Echoing one of the most familiar complaints of black editorial writers, Bung complained, "They never mention the racial identification of any but Negroes in a crime case. The papers stack the cards against us!"

In September, 1947, an enemy agent zapped Bungleton with a proton gun. He awoke a shrimp again, and the artist hinted broadly that the adventures of the last four years had all been a dream. At any rate, a week after his transformation a girl on the street called to him, "Hello, short, sad and seedy." Bung was his old self, and the gag format returned. Jay Jackson and two successors seemed unable to pump consistent humor in the strip, and Chester Commodore finally found producing the strip too much of a chore once the Defender changed to a daily and he had to draw that many more editorial cartoons. Bung disappeared quietly in 1963, although he was resurrected briefly in 1968.

The Courier tried several strips before finding one to challenge "Bungleton Green." During June, 1923, alone, the paper introduced three. "Harold and Pete" was such an obvious carbon of the most popular strip of the day, Bud Fisher's "Mutt and Jeff," that it did not last long. The other two, "Amos Hokum" by James B. Watson and "Sambo Sam" by Charles Russell, featured fall-guy heroes. Amos (later to transfer to the Baltimore Afro-American) even wore a tall hat, like Bungleton. Both strips featured gags about superstitions and omens and were marked by fairly heavy dialect. But the dialect and minstrel lips were nothing compared with the strip which finally emerged as the paper's comics champion.

Holloway, the Courier's editorial cartoonist, introduced "Sunny Boy Sam" on October 5, 1929. In that first strip, Sunny Boy announced, "Well, well, well. Heah. I is folks right back on Wylie Avenoo. Doggone if dis place sho' don't look natchul. Sho do." Shorty, his buddy in the strip, then rushed up to tell him the exciting news about the local election. "Nemmine th' 'lection. What's do numbah t'day?" Sunny Boy asks. Every strip for the next several months turned directly on the numbers game, and the Christmas strip feature Sunny Boy, in Santa Claus outfit, dumping out a great pile of numbers for the readers.

Gradually, the heavy dialect and minstrel features disappeared. Many of the strips were adopted from bearded jokes, such as March 9, 1935, when Sunny Boy's landlady said she was giving him just three days to pay his rent, and he chose Easter, the Fourth of July and Christmas. There were references to the war and to shortages, such as Sunny Boy's move in July, 1945, into a one-room apartment because of the housing shortage. He told Shorty, "Well, there's not much room for complaint." When the Courier added color presses in 1950, Sunny Boy was the first beneficiary. Interesting, so had Bungleton been when the Defender went to color printing in 1927, and both paralleled Joseph Pulitzer's introduction of full-color printing in 1896 with Richard Outcault's "Yellow Kid."[7]

By 1947, Sunny Boy was speaking like a college graduate: "It's evident people are influenced by environment." The artists by then were reserving cornpone accents for evil whites. Garrett Whyte certainly did this in his Defender strip of the mid-1940's, "The Notorious Mr. Jim Crow." A crow with a pompadour and the garb of a roadshow Simon Legree made sure

various institutions preserved "fine old southern traditions." He was delighted in 1947 to find that in Hollywood, all black actors were either mammies or teeth-chattering comic sidekicks, but he did not fare so well at a grade school, where the children had the "true facts" about black contributions to American history. The artists often worked in some black history. In the 1930's the Defender printed nearly 100 weekly episodes of "In the Footsteps of Lincoln," with a text edited by Ida Tarbell. The cartoon history was purchased from the McClure Newspaper Syndicate. During the same decade, the Courier carried a long comic strip biography of Burt Williams, the black entertainer.

Ethnic and racial humor were staples of the comics as they developed from the 1890's on, as they were on the stage and later in the movies and on radio. Before the turn of the century, E. W. Kemple moved his cartoons about pickaninnies ("Blackberries") from St. Nicholas Magazine to a newspaper syndicate. The Irish were the butt of the jokes in "Happy Hooligan" and "Bringing Up Father," the Swedes in "Yen Yensen, the Yanitor," the Germans in "The Katzenjammer Kids," the French in "Alphonse and Gaston," and the Jews in "Abie the Agent." If, as Russel Nye has suggested, the fact that the American lower classes responded warmly to ethnic and racial stereotypes in vaudeville showed "something about the assimilative process at work in an expanding, variegated society," then the same would seem applicable to the comics.[8]

Syndicated comic strips of the 1930's and '40's were populated by such black supporting characters as Mushmouth, the waiter in "Moon Mullins," Memphis the valet in "Dick Tracy," and Smokey the ring second in "Joe Palooka." Civil rights groups finally pressured the feature syndicate to

eliminate Smokey, just as another group did with a stereotypical black character in "Captain Marvel" comic books.[9] With the rise in black consciousness, virtually all black characters disappeared.

In 1964, a black cartoonist, Morrie Turner, syndicated "Wee Pals," a strip with kids of all races, and this was followed soon by "Luther," by Brumsic Brandon Jr. about a nine-year-old black boy. Neither was widely used during the first few years.

It was interesting that the kid strips integrated first; there was a long tradition of such strips in the black press. For years, "Elmer" by Clifford van Buren graced the Baltimore Afro-American and "Billy Ken" the Chicago Defender. Samuel Milai introduced "Bucky" as a kid strip in the Pittsburgh Courier in World War II but removed him in 1950 in favor of a continuity strip featuring Bucky's Uncle, "Don Powers," a professional baseball player.

Most creators of comic strips were wary about introducing black characters, and in fact, the comics page was the last major bastion of segregation, following even the movies, television entertainment, and commercials. The sales director for one syndicate told the National Cartoonists Society meeting in 1967 that it would be difficult to include blacks in humor strips without being offensive. "Could we get away with a Negro 'Andy Capp'?" he asked. He pointed out what the cartoonists knew: humor is aggressive.[10]

Black kids began showing up in strips, including since 1968, the popular "Peanuts." The little black boy, Franklin, first met Charlie Brown at a beach; later he quietly integrated that classroom, with no fanfare. A black theater director appeared in "Mary Worth." Black doctors and policemen appeared more and more frequently in the continuity strips.

On Nov. 11, 1968, the first episode of "Dateline: Danger!" was offered for syndication. It involved a black and white roving correspondent for a magazine, and many of the characters were black. In January, 1970, the Chicago Tribune-New York News Syndicate introduced "Friday Foster," which had as its central character a beautiful black fashion model and photographer. Although the syndicate promised it would portray "America's most dramatic day-to-day news story, as one girl actually lives it--the story of black Americans reaching out for a piece of the action,"[11] it was little more than a blackface "Brenda Starr." Neither "Friday Foster" or "Dateline: Danger'," did well, but they were not as revolutionary as they seemed. Blacks had been following swashbuckling ebony heroes for years in the strips in their own papers.

During the 1940's, the period during which adventure strips were at their peak of popularity in all newspapers, these included "Jive Gray," created for the Courier by Ollie Harrington, and "Speed Jaxon," drawn by Jay Jackson for the Defender.

Jive was a hotshot young aviator. Much like Terry in "Terry and the Pirates," he raced all over the world, destroying enemies and rescuing damsels in distress. Black newspapers had been instrumental in pressuring the Army Air Corps to train black pilots and mechanics and to send the all-black 332d Fighter Group into combat over Southern Europe. No unit received so much coverage in the black papers; clearly it was the glamour unit of the war. The 450 black pilots who made it overseas not only flew 15,000 sorties and downed 111 enemy planes in the air, but in the process they proved that blacks could make it in the air force to come.[12]

The end of World War II posed the same problem for Jive as it did for Terry, and their creators solved it in similar fashion, George Wunder by sending Terry back to the intrigues of the Orient and Harrington by dispatching Jive to the aid of South African guerillas, battling tyrannical white colonialists. On Feb. 25, 1950, after downing an enemy plane, Jive mused,"Here I am, commander of the one-plane African liberation air force. The boys on the main stem would swear I've blown my top."

Speed was a former track star, whose creator inserted many social comments into the sometimes stilted dialogue. In February 1943, Speed eluded his Japanese captors and ripped the periscope off a submarine seconds before it could torpedo an American troop ship. The dazed commander said, "United Nations do Axis great favor by keeping black boys in labor batallions." The lack of a combat role for black units was a frequent complaint in the editorial columns, as well.[13] As one historian put it: "Within the Negro press, there was disagreement as to strategy and means but the end, to make an unfree world free by ending racial discrimination during the emergency was clear and held in common."[14] It certainly was in the comics.

Two years later, Speed was a Nazi prisoner. After a guard broke up a fight between Speed and a redneck, he asked Speed: "Vhy should you hate us vorse dan you do der American? Ve are honest. Ve don't promise you democracy." Speed turned on his fellow POW: "See, you dumb cracker! It's guys like you that give loyal Americans such a hard job beating the Axis and their propaganda." The white responded: "Gee, Speed, ah nevah thought." Naturally, Speed escaped, this time to parachute into the jungle. On March 24, 1945 (as the war was ending on European battlefronts), he

exclaimed: "Free at last! And right where our ancestors were supposed to have got their start." Then followed various Tarzan-like adventures with amazon princesses and hidden cities.

The "Tarzan" strip itself changed in recent years. Russ Manning, the fifth artist to create the strip since its introduction in 1929, changed the black natives from superstitious fools and cannibals to Tarzan's partners and associates.

An even more significant breakthrough for syndicated comic strips came in October, 1970, when Mort Walker introduced Lt. Flap into "Beetle Bailey." Flap was not just another character who happened to have a black face (and in fact Walker never has used hatching or shading on his face); he was a genuinely "black" character whose humor flowed almost entirely from his racial identification. His first words upon reporting to Camp Swampy were prophetic: "How come there's no blacks in this honkie outfit?" He has intimidated most of the characters, but he has developed a genuine relationship with them--on his own terms. He is never really discriminated against; when the others comment on his Afro or his "threads," they do it with respect rather than ridicule. The syndicate held its breath, but the reaction from blacks was almost universally favorable. When the Stars and Stripes cancelled the strip on the grounds that it was stirring up racial troubles in the army, Senator William Proxmire pleaded the case and won the strips reinstatement. As usual, the publicity gained it even more subscribers.[15]

Those two transformations--of "Tarzan" among adventure strips and of Lt. Flap in gag strips--signify the new treatment of black characters in the comics pages of daily newspapers. Few black papers run their own comic strips anymore, although "Sunny Boy Sam" still runs in the Pittsburgh Courier. The Chicago Defender tried a new type of comic strip, "Hailku"

by W. E. Hayden. It deals with such contemporary topics as divorce and drugs, somewhat in the mode of Garry Trudeau's Doonesbury.

Society's changing concerns and attitudes were summarized in a 1976 "Doonesbury" sequence, in which various people were working to support a black girl's candidacy for office. Clyde, a former Black Panther organizer, asked Andy if he didn't think he might be an embarrassment to the campaign.

Andy: How's that, Clyde?

Clyde: Well, I hear you're gay!

Andy: That's right--and I hear you're black.

Clyde: Yeah, but that's normal!

Andy: Didn't used to be.[16]

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Footnotes

1. For recent histories, see Roland E. Wolseley, The Black Press USA (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1971) pp. 3-67; John D. Stevens, "Black Journalism: Neglected No Longer," in Ronald T. Farrar and John D. Stevens (eds.), Mass Media and the National Experience (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 97-111; and several chapters in Henry LaBrie III (ed.), Perspectives of the Black Press 1974 (Kennebunkport, Me.: Mercer House Press, 1974).

2. John D. Stevens, "Bungleton Green: Black Comic Strip Ran 43 Years," Journalism Quarterly 51 (Spring 1974), pp. 122-124.

3. Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs, Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium (Boston: Little Brown, 1971), p. 30.

4. Eg., William Pickens, American Aesop: Negro and Other Humor (Boston: Jordan and More, 1926; reprinted New York: AMS Press, 1969): Philip Sterling, Laughing on the Outside: the Intelligent White Reader's Guide to Negro Tales and Humor (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1965); Roger D. Abrahams, Positively Black (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

5. Robert Blake, "The Lion Act is Over: Passive/Aggressive Patterns of Communication in American Negro Humor," Journal of Popular Culture 9 (Winter 1975), pp. 549-560.

6. Ibid., p. 556.

7. Pierre Couperie and Maurice C. Horn, A History of the Comic Strip (New York: Crown Publishers, 1968), p. 15.

8. Russel Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse (New York: Dial Press, 1970), p. 171.

9. Ponchitta Pierce, "What's Not So Funny About the Funnies," Ebony 22 (November 1966), pp. 48-56; Pittsburgh Courier, May 5, 1945.

10. Editor & Publisher, April 8, 1967.

11. Ibid., Dec. 6, 1969.

12. John D. Stevens, "From the Back of the Foxhole: Black Correspondents in World War II," Journalism Monographs 27 (Feb. 1973), pp. 23-25.

13. Ibid., p. 14.

14. Herbert Garfinkel, When Negroes March (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959), p. 25. Italics his.

15. Editor & Publisher, Jan. 23, 1971; Mort Walker, Backstage at the Strips (New York: Mason Charter, 1975), p. 58.

16. Detroit Free Press, March 20, 1976.